Configuring museum digital research in Australia

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Abstract

How might museums operate as a locus for research action? Based on the engagement of the co-chairs with burgeoning formations of museum digital research, this panel will bring together a set of presenters to share a range of perspectives and experiences that indicate the current state of *practice research* in the Australian cultural ecosystem. This panel will explore how research has traditionally been situated in museums to articulate what the basis for a values-led approach to research *into*, *for* and *through* museums might entail if it fully embraces creative experimentation, nurtures reflective practice, and cultivates a willingness to operate openly and collaboratively across cultural, academic and creative industry sectors.

Keywords

Digital culture, Museums, Cultural ecosystems, Practice research, Cross-sectoral collaboration and partnership

Introduction

In his keynote lecture for the ICOM General Conference in 2001, Manuel Castells set out fundamental issues that museums face in the context of the cultural and technological change by asking: *What capacity do museums have to intervene in the significant cultural contradiction that is emerging in the information era?* In the intervening years, the ways that museums have responded to this question has extended well beyond what he recognised as their ability to 'integrat[e] state-of-the-art research' into educative functions to facing a broader paradigmatic challenge for *how museums might operate as a locus for research action.* This panel will therefore address how research has traditionally been situated in museums to articulate what the basis for a values-led approach to research *into*, *for* and *through* museums might entail if it fully embraces creative experimentation, nurtures reflective practice, and cultivates a willingness to operate openly and collaboratively across cultural, academic and creative industry sectors.

Based on the engagement of the co-chairs with burgeoning formations of museum digital research, this panel will bring together a set of presenters to share a range of perspectives and experiences that indicate the current state of *practice research* in the Australian cultural ecosystem. As an *ensemble*, we will draw upon grounded experience situated within leading cultural organisations (including ACMI,

QAGOMA and the AGWA) in combination with critically informed scoping studies to not only provide an overview of the current state of museum research but in the process, help us notice important shifts in the terrain of university-museum-public partnership where research collaboration is beginning to be aligned with shared values. This discussion will provide a platform to explore the fundamental role that digital culture plays in configuring museum research futures in Australia; as subject, means of facilitating connection and a greater sense of collectivity, and by bringing distinctive values to the research process.

Scene-setting Presentations

Vince Dziekan's discussion will point to opportunities where both universities and museums can activate *research action*, a collective and practice-driven approach to digital culture research. These observations will reflect on insights gained from *Assembly*, an online research initiative developed by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) in collaboration with the Australian National University and Monash University.

This prefatory presentation will be complemented by Indigo Holcombe-James' presentation focusing on the strategic integration of new research initiatives at ACMI (Melbourne, Victoria) as part of its internally driven agenda and commitment to enhancing the organisation's research capability.

Assembly: Reshaping museum/research

Assembly is a research undertaking developed by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), in collaboration with the Australian National University and Monash University that convened a dialogue across the Australian museum and university sectors to reimagine research collaboration aligned to their shared public values. This presentation will set out why thinking differently about the role and value of research can help museums (as a shorthand reference, or proxy, for cultural sector organisations) to purposefully interrogate, productively understand and proactively respond to the pressing strategic demands and changing public contexts they share with universities. The discussion will point to currently unrealised, yet mutually beneficial opportunities presented for both universities and museums that they can activate together through developing a new collective and practice-driven approach to research as a

key strategic institutional capability shared between these knowledge institutions sectors.

Developing a strategic external research practice

Whether explicitly recognised as formal research or not, research practice has always been central to the work of museums. Research by curatorial and collections departments, for example, deepens our understanding of our collections, expands our knowledge, and provides enriched experiences for our audiences. Audience or visitor research facilitates greater understanding of not only who our audiences are, but how we might better serve them, and reach those not yet engaging with us.

At the same time, with the rise of impact agendas within the neoliberal university system, and the acknowledgement that cultural organisations like museums—with their ready access to 'the public'—make ideal research partners, we have seen increasing interest from external researchers. While these collaborations have been fruitful, they have—by default—been driven by external interests, and, in doing so, required internal museum resourcing to be allocated away from core business.

In a context of diminished public funding, it is increasingly important that our resources are strategically deployed. In light of this, ACMI is developing a more internally driven research agenda, characterised by a commitment to enhancing our capabilities, and developing research partnerships that align strategically with our organisational mission, vision, and goals.

This approach marks a significant shift in the way cultural organisations have typically approached research with external partners. While external collaborations remain essential, the strategic integration of research initiatives ensures research is not an auxiliary function but a fundamental aspect of our core business. This transformative approach not only enhances *our* capabilities but offers an example for the future of research in and with cultural organisations.

Panel Discussion by Invited Speakers

Sejul Malde will speak to a recent study (The Research Orientations and Needs of Australian Museums & Galleries Report) that surfaces common and emergent themes found in scoping studies of Australian and International museum-based research. A review of these findings offers a fresh understanding of the research landscape by emphasising research in terms of framing, focus, activities, and relationships between museums and external partners including universities, culture sector agencies, and creative industries.

For their part, Morgan Strong will reflect directly upon the programme of Digital Transformation Initiatives that QAGOMA (Brisbane, Queensland) has undertaken in response to issues of digitisation in a contemporary museum setting, both in terms of content production and infrastructure, as well as new challenges presented by datafication,

such as piloting how AI introduces new ways of exploring art collections).

Finally, Ana Tiquia will present innovative curatorial research that informs *Seeder Futures*, a project that explores what a collection truly owned by the people of West Australia might look like by putting the public domain collection managed by the Art Gallery of Western Australia (Perth, Western Australia) into dialogue with the community in Kepa Kurl/Esperance.

Exploring the research orientations and needs of Australian museums and galleries

Sejul Malde will speak to a recent study was undertaken by the Strategic Research Development unit at the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at the Australian National University (ANU), in partnership with the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) that explored the current and potential research orientation, capabilities, interests, experiences and needs of Australian museums and galleries. The study undertook desk-based research from across the wider Australian museum sector, and then carried out 13 interviews with stakeholders from across 7 museums to draw out more specific and nuanced insights that inform future learning and advocacy into new collaborative research development opportunities between Australian galleries & museums and universities, and other relevant stakeholders, to better address social, public and civic needs.

Sejul's presentation will discuss common and emergent themes identified by this study and propose ways of understanding current museum research perspectives by emphasising research framing (e.g. How do museums currently interpret their role in connection to research?), research focus (e.g. What potential research themes are of interest to museums currently?), research activities (e.g. How do museums operationally enact research currently?), and research relationships (e.g. What do museums see as the current opportunities and challenges of working with external partners including universities, culture sector agencies, and creative industries?). Particular attention will be paid to d*igital media-based research.* A newer, yet increasingly prominent, form of research amongst Australian museums stems from the proliferation of digital content, channels, and technologies that museums are now grappling with. This research might focus on explorations to digitise certain collections, or it might be about inspiring new and innovative uses of those digitised collections, or it might be about enriching the visitor's experience of the museum through multiple digital channels.

Digital and technology strategic initiatives: The QAGOMA Digital Transformation Initiative

Morgan Strong will discuss the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art's (QAGOMA) Digital Transformation Initiative. This program is a wide-reaching program to digitise the Collection, focus on digital content production and integration in Gallery spaces, and to modernise back-end infrastructure. Additionally, this program has

partnered with external parties, from artists to academia to digital thinkers, via research programs and residencies to think in new ways about how digital can deliver experiences with the art Collections.

The program has been running since early 2020, just as COVID lock-down kicked in, over the last 3 years the program has updated most of the end-of-life internal systems; digitised close to 85% of the (with a goal of >95% by the time the program ends); delivered several residences and research commissions; and importantly now has started piloting an internal AI-powered PWA that works across the Collection to deliver new ways of exploring the art.

Seeder Futures

Ana Tiquia will speak to the practices and systems that govern the management, storage, and access to a state art collection. Digitisation of state collections promises to increase access, particularly for rural populations who might never visit a state gallery. But several collections have practices, policies, and web infrastructures that restrict this.

In researching new work titled, *Seeder Futures* – a distributed, digital artwork that established a peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing protocol between the community of Kepa Kurl/Esperance and the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), Tiquia explored institutional infrastructures that restrict access to high resolution files of public domain artwork. *Seeder Futures* explored what a collection truly owned by the people of West Australia might look like by inviting the AGWA to share their public domain collection with the community in Kepa Kurl/Esperance, thereby enacting an alternative way AGWA's state collection could be stored, distributed, and made accessible to a rural community. Ana's presentation will share how their work emerged from artist-led futures research, where they hosted conversations on "good futures" with community members in Esperance and curators and digital collections management staff at AGWA to open up institutional conversations on digital access and ownership and generate shared imaginaries between museums and their publics.

Authors Biographies (Panel Co-Chairs)

Vince Dziekan is a senior academic and practitioner-researcher at Monash Art, Design and Architecture (MADA), Monash University, Australia, and holds a fellowship position with the Institute for Digital Culture at the University of Leicester, UK. Vince's work engages with the transformation of contemporary curatorial practices at the intersection of emerging design practices, creative technology, and museum culture. The scope of these interdisciplinary investigations is reflected in his books, *Virtuality and the Art of Exhibition: Curatorial Design for the Multimedial Museum* (Intellect Books | University of Chicago Press, 2012), and *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Media and Communication* (Routledge, 2018). Vince has published widely in traditional, scholarly as well as non-traditional modes through his independent curatorial practice. He is currently leading research programmes as general editor of *The Encyclopaedia of New Media Art* (Bloomsbury), and series co-editor (along with Ross Parry) of a new book series for Routledge, titled Critical Perspectives on Museums and Digital Technology.

Indigo Holcombe-James is the Strategic Research Lead at ACMI, your museum of screen culture. In this role, Indigo coordinates research projects with tertiary partners, commissions market research, and conducts the in-house visitor research and evaluation that ensures the audience is at the centre of the museum. Prior to joining ACMI, Indigo was a Research Fellow at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making & Society, located in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Indigo's research focussed on digital transformation and inequality in cultural and creative institutions and industries, and has been published in *Cultural Trends*, *Archival Science*, *Media International Australia*, *Informatics and Telematics*, and the *International Journal of Communication*.

Authors Biographies (Invited Panelists)

Sejul Malde is the Strategic Research Development Manager of the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Australian National University. His role focusses on shaping the strategic research capacity of the College through developing and implementing specific strategic initiatives involving collaboration with cultural organisations that enhance social & public value. Previously Sejul was Research Manager at Culture24, a UK strategic agency focusing on digital leadership and capacity building for the arts and heritage sector.

Morgan Strong is the digital transformation manager at the Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art. Morgan has been working with technology in the GLAM sector for almost 15 years, collaborating with institutes across the country. Morgan's work focuses on leveraging technology to create meaningful, to create meaning from collection data and improve the way museums can embrace digital to improve the way they do their work.

Ana Tiquia is a strategist, producer, curator and artist working at the intersections of art, technology, design, and futures research. Ana is founder of All Tomorrow's Futures, a cultural and strategic consultancy working with organisations looking to embody new forms, practices, and capacities in times of transition. As a producer and curator, they have worked with leading arts and cultural organisations in the UK and Australia to produce projects that harness advanced technologies. Ana's work aims to seed diverse futures of data and technology by intervening in everyday, workplace, and institutional practices. Ana's most recent work has been commissioned by MOD. (Museum of Discovery, Adelaide), ANAT SPECTRA22, Spaced and the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA). Ana is currently Head of Digital Strategy, Research and Insights at State Library Victoria.